

WAR HEADQUARTERS

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Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief

War Headquarters

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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LINCOLN LORE

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THE WAR HEADQUARTERS OF LINCOLN

Abraham Lincoln was the first commander-in-chief of a great military force to direct the movements of several armies from a central office. He was "the fore-runner of the Higher Command" as Ballard puts it. This new method of directing maneuvers by separate armies far removed from each other could only be successfully put into operation by what was then a comparatively new invention—the telegraph.

The importance of this medium of communication made the Telegraph Office at Washington virtually the War Headquarters of the President. Inasmuch as the office was located adjacent to the room occupied by the Secretary of War, and just across the lawn from the White House, it might be said that amidst the clicking of the telegraph instruments the prosecution of the war was planned and its final successful conclusion was accomplished.

Andrew Carnegie, serving as assistant general manager of railroads and telegraph lines, sent one of the first telegrams from the War Department on April 22, 1861. He requested the superintendent of telegraphs for the Pennsylvania Railroad at Altoona, to send four of his best operators to enter the government telegraph service for the war. The four young men who answered the call were David Homer Bates, Samuel M. Brown, Richard O'Brien, and David Strouse. They found the nucleus for the United States Military Telegraph Corps. The first named operator became the author of one of the most valuable Lincoln source books, *Lincoln in the Telegraph Office*.

It was just eighty-seven years ago today that Abraham Lincoln received from the hands of operator David Homer Bates, the first of the many tragic messages which were to follow. It reported the shooting of Col. Ellsworth at the Marshall House, Alexandria, Virginia. As the war progressed Lincoln was found making several visits to the Telegraph Office daily or as Bates relates, "He visited the War Department Telegraph Office morning, afternoon, and evening, to receive the latest news from the armies at the front." No telegraph receivers were installed in the Executive Mansion at this time.

David Strouse was made superintendent of the operators, but overwork was largely responsible for his death in November, 1861, when he was succeeded by James R. Gilmore, an important figure in Washington throughout the war. Gilmore was succeeded by Thomas T. Eckert.

Bates mentions as one of the early recruits in the office, Edward Rosewater, who later became proprietor of the *Omaha Bee*. This past February, the Editor of Lincoln Lore met at Los Angeles, Mrs. Milton B. Newman, a daughter of Edward Rosewater. On September 18, 1862, Rosewater wrote a letter to Miss Leah Colman, whom he later married. This letter, which was made available by Mrs. Newman, follows in part:

"Since writing you last I have been working in the War Dept. Telegraph Office. It is now 3 o'clock A.M. & as I am on duty for the night I take this chance to describe you the office. It is upstairs in the War Dept. The operating room was formerly the library of Secty of War, whose office is opposite ours. The room has carpets and 8 marble & 4 mahogany small size tables, with an instrument on each table, showing twelve lines enter into the office. There are eight operators. In front of our room is an elegantly furnished room occupied by Col Stager, chief over all lines in U. S. The Prest, Secty of War & Gen Halleck come in occasionally. The Prest every morning about 8 o'clock comes in to read dispatches, which are copied into books. His house being next to this, he is here often but Sunday he was in all day; with his white satin slippers, common black suit and spectacles on he looks funny. Comes in & asks operators

all kinds of questions. Sometimes he tells an anecdote or reads a story aloud & laughs (you could hear him ½ mile)."

Some further description of this telegraph office which was to become the war headquarters of Lincoln is of importance. The old War Department Building where the telegraph office was located faced Pennsylvania Avenue just to the west of the Executive Mansion, and a path led from the White House directly to the entrance of the Building. It is doubtful if Lincoln ever trod a walk with most anxiety than this narrow strip of by-way.

The building we would describe as a three-story brick with a portico reaching two stories. The first two windows to the left of the portico on the second floor which looked out on Pennsylvania Avenue locate the cipher-operators' room where Lincoln spent so much of his time. At the first window stood Major Eckert's desk, at which the President usually sat while there. The space to the left of the operators' room was occupied by Major Johnson, custodian of military telegrams, and next to his room the office of Secretary Stanton. To the right of the cipher room was the dispatch and receiving room described by Rosewater.

The contents of the cipher room beside Major Eckert's desk by the north wall include a safe to the right of the desk, and to the right of the other window, the cashier's desk. Against the west wall stood a cipher-operator's desk and on the east wall, an open fireplace. In the center of the room there was a table. The door in the east wall which led to Stanton's office was usually open and it was on this door that Lincoln is said to have hung his coat or shawl during his daily visits.

The convenience of the telegraph discouraged self-reliance in some instances, and Lincoln very early sensed this attitude in a note to Secretary Cameron. With reference to a newly appointed brigadier-general he advised, "Tell him when he starts to put it through—not to be writing or telegraphing back here but put it through."

A great many dispatches were received by Mr. Lincoln criticizing his administration and asking disrespectful questions. He exclaimed on one occasion, "I can't afford to answer every crazy question asked me," and hereafter the operator called this class of critical telegrams "crazygrams."

The humor of Lincoln was probably demonstrated in the telegraph office as much as at any other place. For instance when referring to Jefferson Davis or Robert E. Lee by some vicious epithets such as was applied to them, he invariably used the terms "Jeffy D." and "Bobby Lee." An operator at Wilmington, Delaware, by the name of John Wintrup signed his name on official letters with a tremendous flourish on the final "p" which brought his second or final loop of the "p" far down below the verticle part of the letter. Lincoln observing it one day remarked, "That reminds me of a short legged man in a big overcoat, the tail of which was so long it wiped out his footprints in the snow." The story was a proper companion piece for the overcoat shuck and nubbin story he told about Stevens at City Point.

Possibly one of the most significant facts about Lincoln's long hours at the Telegraph office was that it kept him continually in touch with Stanton. It might be truly said that he saw more of Stanton than any other cabinet member, not excepting Seward. It was in his War Headquarters at the Telegraph Office that he received on the night of November 8, the assurance that he had again been reelected as President of the United States for a second term.

